

# Enable and Succeed, Force and Fail: Military Intervention to Enable Democratization

A Monograph

by

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## Abstract

Enable and Succeed, Force and Fail: Military Intervention to Enable Democratization, by MAJ Chester D. Boyles, US Army, 48 pages.

Wilsonian ideals regarding the spread of democracy and protection of human rights have underpinned American foreign policy since its inception. As a result, the United States has involved itself in numerous efforts to both protect and spread democracy in foreign lands. In many instances, it has done so through forceful military intervention. The record of these interventions is littered with failures, suggesting limitations in the forced democratization approach, but successes in West Germany, Japan, and South Korea provide compelling counter arguments. Identifying variables that affect the likelihood that forced democratization succeeds is extremely valuable given the wars given stated US foreign policy aims suggesting it will continue to intervene in foreign states whose instability threatens US national interests. The fact that the United States is also likely to install democratic governments only magnifies the importance of studying why force democratization so often fails. The United States' success in South Korea shows that, contrary to the claims of critics, democratic development is possible even when states lack favorable preconditions. The South Korea case indicates that the difference between forced democratization and natural democratization should be a matter of degree not kind. When excessive external influence makes the two processes significantly different, forced democratization is unlikely to produce lasting democracy. Force democratization succeeds when the intervening power starts a country on the path to democracy and uses its influence to support the development of favorable democratic conditions, while still allowing the target state to democratize naturally, usually implying a multi-decade intervention.

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## Acronyms

CFC	Combined Forces Command
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DPF	Democratic People's Front
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
ECA	Economic Cooperation Administration
EIU	Economist Intelligence Unit
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNP	Gross National Product
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
KCIA	Korean Central Intelligence Agency
KDP	Korean Democratic Party
KMAG	Korean Military Advisory Group
KPG	Korean Provisional Government
KPR	Korean People's Republic
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ROK	Republic of Korea
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
SKA	South Korean Army
SKILA	South Korean Interim Legislative Assembly
UNC	United Nations Command
UNTCOK	United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea
USAMGIK	United States Army Military Government in Korea
USOM	United States Operations Mission

## Introduction

Aside from two brief periods of non-interventionism, Wilsonian ideals regarding the spread of democracy and protection of human rights have underpinned American foreign policy since its inception.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the United States has involved itself in numerous efforts to both protect and spread democracy in foreign lands. In many instances, it has done so through forceful military intervention. The record of these interventions is littered with failures, suggesting limitations in the forced democratization approach, but successes in West Germany, Japan, and South Korea provide compelling counter arguments. Identifying variables that affect the likelihood that forced democratization succeeds is extremely valuable given the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and stated US foreign policy aims suggesting it will continue to intervene in foreign states whose instability threatens US national interests. The fact that the United States is also likely to install democratic governments in its intervention targets only magnifies the importance of studying why forced democratization so often fails.

Forced democratization is the deliberate military intervention in a target states' domestic affairs for the purpose of bringing about democratic change.<sup>2</sup> Its success is entirely dependent on the democratization of its target, not regional stability or the prevention of conflict. The latter two outcomes are the byproduct of successful democratization, but can be achieved despite failures in democratic development. In fact, research suggests that violent conflict is likely to increase during a state's transition to democracy. The dichotomy between the desire for peace and stability and the turbulent path to democracy, is perhaps the biggest challenge to successful forced democratization.

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<sup>1</sup> Before and after World War I.

<sup>2</sup> Scott Walker, "What Have We Learned about Forced Democratisation?," *New Zealand International Review* 37, no. 3 (June 5, 2012): 9.



Its proponents argue that democracy promotion is an effective and legitimate means to achieve peace, while opponents point to its poor track record of success and propensity to increase instability. Rather than argue the merits of forced democratization or place value judgements on the United States' decisions to impose democracy abroad, this study seeks to determine why some efforts succeed and others fail. The answer to this question would ensure that genuine efforts to establish lasting democracies abroad are undertaken with a clear understanding of the significant long-term commitment and patience required to succeed.

The United States' success in South Korea shows that, contrary to the claims of critics, democratic development is possible even when states lack favorable preconditions. South Korea overcame extremely poor economic and social conditions to become one of the strongest and freest democracies in the world. How it was able to achieve this can be traced back to how South Korea began its journey towards democracy and the degree to which its democratic development was influenced by its democratic patron, the United States.

South Korea started out as a liberal democracy when the United States established a parliamentary system in 1948 but from that point forward, the United States exerted little influence on South Korea's system of governance. As a result, South Korea experienced significant backslides towards autocracy. When viewed without context, these backslides are often misconstrued as evidence of failure, but they are actually fundamental components of democratic development. The United States' hands-off approach was hardly a deliberate attempt to foster democratic development, but it had that effect nonetheless. By applying only minimal pressure on the South Korean government to democratize, the United States enabled democratization to occur naturally as favorable democratic conditions developed.

The implications for future efforts to impose democracy are significant and indicate there are no short-cuts or violence-free paths to stable democracy. If the goal of military intervention is conflict prevention or regional stabilization, forced democratization is unlikely to

achieve either. However, if the goal is to install a lasting democratic government, the intervenor must provide long-term support towards the development of conditions favorable to democracy while resisting the urge to intervene in every instance the target state fails to adhere to democratic principles and ideals. This entails a multi-decade intervention and a willingness to accept the struggle, conflict, and violence that comes with democracy.

## Literature Review

This literature review will cover the topics of democratization, forced democratization, and the military's role in forced democratization. The first section will examine existing theories on how democracies develop in order to provide a theoretical basis for understanding the related field of forced democratization. It will also introduce some of the key conditions that support democratization while underscoring the problems and challenges faced by states transitioning to democratic forms of government. The forced democratization section will summarize existing research on the forced democratization efforts of Western nations since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and expand on the favorable conditions introduced in the previous section. The final section will provide the context for the research of this paper.

## Democratization

Democratization is the term used to describe how democratic governments develop. Although many scholars associate democratization with a transition from an authoritarian form of government to one that is democratic, others argue that the demise of authoritarianism is distinct from the rise of democracy.<sup>3</sup> More recently, scholars have argued that many “transitional” democracies are not actually in transition. Instead, they are consolidated into a new, “semi-authoritarian” form of government.<sup>4</sup> In either case, the study of democratization is a relatively new

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<sup>3</sup> Gerardo L. Munck, “Democratic Theory after Transitions from Authoritarian Rule,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 2 (June 2011): 334.

<sup>4</sup> Ashok Swain, Ramses Amer, and Joakim Öjendal, eds., *Democratization Project* (London, UK: Anthem Press, 2009), 4.

field. It was not until the rise of “third wave” democracies towards the end of the Cold War that scholars began to focus their attention on how democratic governments develop.<sup>5</sup> In the same period, a global fascination with post-conflict peacebuilding arose, further feeding interest in democratization.

During the early 1990s pro-liberalization theories began to dominate the political landscape.<sup>6</sup> As a result, peacebuilding became more than simply seeking to prevent future conflict. It sought to address the root causes of conflict itself. Liberal ideology pointed to democracy as the solution. Francis Fukuyama’s famous thesis from *End of History and the Last Man* (1991), declared liberal democracy as the final evolution of human governance.<sup>7</sup> Fukuyama’s arguments spurred additional research that ultimately led to what is commonly referred to as the democratic peace doctrine. Bruce Russett led the way, arguing that democratic nations do not wage war against each other. Therefore, the proliferation of democracy is the surest path to world peace and prosperity.<sup>8</sup> Fukuyama and Russett’s arguments became the primary justification for western efforts to promote democracy globally after the Cold War.

These efforts did not have the desired or expected effect. Instead, a pattern of civil war and sectarian violence emerged in countries attempting to transition from dictatorship to democracy. Mansfield and Snyder attempted to explain this phenomenon by arguing that although stable democracies do not fight each other, democratization increases the likelihood of war. Their theories challenged the use of democratic peace doctrine as justification for promoting democratization, but

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<sup>5</sup> Charles T. Call and Susan E. Cook, “On Democratization and Peacebuilding,” *Global Governance* 9, no. 2 (2003): 233.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Paris, “Saving Liberal Peacebuilding,” *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 2 (April 2010): 338.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “The ‘End of History’ 20 Years Later,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (October 2013): 31.

<sup>8</sup> Swain et al., 6.

stopped short of dismissing the theory itself.<sup>9</sup> However, their research highlighted the difficulties faced by democratizing states and shifted the focus to identifying the conditions that make successful democratization more likely. In other words, finding the answer to the question of why some countries become democracies while others do not. Several schools of thought exist regarding exactly what those conditions are, but in general they can be reduced to a single issue: the balance of power between pro-democratic and anti-democratic interests.<sup>10</sup>

Scholars describe the balance in several ways, but Bermeo's "double challenge" of democratization does well to summarize it. To make her point, Bermeo focuses less on the opposing forces and more on the pro-democracy elites charged with establishing a democratic government. The double challenge for elites is to increase the cost of violent competition while at the same time reducing the cost of electoral competition.<sup>11</sup> In terms of balance, this means achieving a political state where competing groups trust the democratic system to "represent a compromise-equilibrium."<sup>12</sup> As the central issue for democratization, it follows that any condition that greatly affects this process will also impact the probability of successful democratization.<sup>13</sup>

While some scholars still disagree about specific conditions, including whether economic development actually hinders democratization, most agree that conditions favorable to democratization do exist. Scholars resist labeling these as pre-conditions because democratization can begin despite their absence, but still recognize their importance. It is how scholars prioritize these conditions that determines their views on a related issue, forced democratization.

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<sup>9</sup> Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and War," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (1995): 79–80.

<sup>10</sup> Dietrich Rueschemeyer, "Democratization," in *Wiley Blackwell Companions to Sociology: The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Political Sociology*, ed. Edwin Amenta, Kate Nash, and Alan Scott, 1st ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 456.

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Bermeo, "What the Democratization Literature Says-or Doesn't Say-About Postwar Democratization," *Global Governance* 9, no. 2 (June 2003): 163.

<sup>12</sup> Rueschemeyer, 456.

<sup>13</sup> Bermeo, 163.

## Forced Democratization

The majority of research on forced democratization focuses on its efficacy as a strategy for spreading democracy. Prominent arguments exist both for and against it. Researchers who favor the strategy point to the success of post-WWII democracies such as Japan and West Germany.

Counterarguments highlight the low success rate of forced democratization in general and dismiss successes as anomalies in a pattern of failure. Finally, a third group has emerged that argues success is determined by the conditions of the targeted state and the strategy employed. Although a general consensus exists about what those favorable conditions are, as alluded to in the previous section, scholars disagree about what forced democratization strategy is most effective.

### Proponents

Russett's democratic peace doctrine and Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis form the theoretical base for proponents of forced democratization. It is seen as both an effective and legitimate path to peace. It is effective because mature democracies do not go to war against each other. It derives legitimacy from the belief that democratic states experience greater economic wealth and a higher standard of living, while also better respecting human rights.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, forced democratization allows for the removal of problematic authoritarian regimes.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, forced democratization assumes a moral quality along the lines of responsibility to protect (R2P) provisions adopted by the international community. However, the arguments for forced democratization rely heavily on the assumption that democracy is universally applicable and they must also contend with the overwhelming number of failed cases.

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<sup>14</sup> Andrew J. Enterline and J. Michael Greig, "Against All Odds? The History of Imposed Democracy and the Future of Iraq and Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 4, no. 4 (October 2008): 321.

<sup>15</sup> Bermeo, 162.

## Critics

Critics of forced democratization support their claims by pointing to vast empirical evidence showing that foreign intervention efforts fail to establish successful democratic governments and in many cases, actually hinder their development. Numerous studies show that intervention efforts have no positive effect on democratization and when controlled for the classic post-WWII successes, even fewer positive cases exist.<sup>16</sup> Others argue that democratization is too complex of a process for external forces to control and any instances of success have more to do with the strategic context of the situation than the actions of the intervening authority.<sup>17</sup> Pessimists also dispute claims of legitimacy by noting that despite evidence that mature democracies refrain from warring against other, states in the early phases of transition are actually more prone to violence than any other type of state.<sup>18</sup> In their view, foreign-imposed democratization is harmful to the targeted state's citizens and ineffective at establishing strong democracies.

## Conditionalists

Conditionalists neither reject forced democratization outright nor accepts the optimist's view that it is universally effective and legitimate. Rather, conditionalists subscribe to the view that forced democratization success depends on the presence of specific pre-conditions in the target state that are conducive to democracy and the strategy employed by the intervening state. Conditionalists differ on whether they place more importance on strategy or target state conditions, but in either case, they recognize the benefits of forced democratization as well as the challenges.

For the strategy-focused conditionalists, there are two primary areas that most determine success of forced democratization efforts. The first deals with the level of effort or commitment of

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<sup>16</sup> Alexander B. Downes and Jonathan Monten, "Forced to Be Free?," *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013): 91, 100.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher H. Tuck, "The 'Practice' Problem: Peacebuilding and Doctrine," *Parameters* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 74.

<sup>18</sup> Mansfield and Snyder, "Democratization and War," 79–80.

the intervening authority. The second relates to the sequencing of actions. The latter more closely relates to the conditions of the targeted state, while the former focuses on the intervener. Studies such as James Dobbins' in 2007, argue that the "higher level of [occupation troops and aid per capita] accounts in significant measure for the higher level of...development of democratic institutions and economic growth."<sup>19</sup> A second aspect of intervener commitment is intentions.

Strategy-focused conditionalists also point to intentions as a potential obstacle to successful democratization. Several separate studies found that because democratic transition destabilizes the target state and creates uncertainty, democratization can threaten the national interests of the intervening state.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, when democracy is the true goal of US intervention, it often succeeded. Conversely, when intervention was not explicitly tied to liberalizing the target state, its impact was negligible.<sup>21</sup> Intervenor effort and intentions are clearly important factors in forced democratization, but they do not explain why some states still fail to fully democratize despite substantial intervenor effort and legitimate intervenor intentions. This is where arguments focused on the democratic pre-conditions in target states arise.

In general, the same conditions that promote democratization make forced democratization more likely to succeed. These conditions can be broadly categorized into four different areas, namely *government institutions*, *economic development*, *sociocultural factors*, and *exogenous factors*. Samuel Huntington and others have argued for a number of specific conditions which promote democratization, including increased wealth, a large middle-class, income equality, democratic neighbors, and experience with colonialism, among others.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Downes and Monten, 97.

<sup>20</sup> Michael K. McKoy and Michael K. Miller, "The Patron's Dilemma: The Dynamics of Foreign-Supported Democratization," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 5 (2012): 905; Downes and Monten, 99.

<sup>21</sup> Downes and Monten, 99.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave," *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 13; Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "The Sequencing 'Fallacy,'" *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 3 (July 2007): 6; Swain et al., 168–69.

Target state-focused conditionalists argue that forced democratization is unlikely to occur in target states where “domestic preconditions for democracy are lacking,” regardless of good intentions and effort level.<sup>23</sup> Given that these conditions are unlikely to exist in the countries targeted for intervention, target state-focused conditionalists hold a pessimistic view of the prospects of forced democratization. However, most conditionalists are not singly focused on intervenor strategy or target state conditions.

The majority of conditionalists contend that successful forced democratization depends not only on the concrete actions and intentions of the intervening state, but also on the domestic context of the target country.<sup>24</sup> Although a general consensus exists on what the pre-conditions for democracy are, scholars cannot agree on the best strategy for imposing democracy. Democratic sequencing is the primary source of disagreement. At the center of the sequencing argument is a recognition that the “conditions in the target state—not interveners’ efforts or actions—[are] the key variables influencing the success or failure of military interventions in producing democratic change.”<sup>25</sup> Proponents of democratic sequencing contend that addressing democratic pre-conditions in the right sequence is the key to successful forced democratization.<sup>26</sup> Opponents of democratic sequencing argue that autocratic regimes are inherently incompatible with democratic pre-conditions such as rule of law and state-building, making the argument for sequencing those conditions before removal of autocratic regimes illogical.<sup>27</sup> Regardless of view, it is clear that the existence of favorable democratic conditions is an important factor in predicting the likelihood of successful forced democratization

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<sup>23</sup> Downes and Monten, 94.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>26</sup> Mansfield and Snyder, “The Sequencing ‘Fallacy,’” 6.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Carothers, “The ‘Sequencing’ Fallacy,” *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 1 (January 2007): 14.



## *Pre-Conditions*

The following section will describe the most commonly accepted democratic pre-conditions that exist within the categories previously outlined (*government institutions, economic development, sociocultural factors, and exogenous factors*). This provides a useful framework for analyzing the strategic context of the subsequent case study with the purpose of determining whether target states possess favorable conditions for democracy at the time of intervention.

*Government Institutions.* States with strong and legitimate governmental institutions are more likely to democratize than those that do not. The most important democratic pre-conditions in this category are an effective security apparatus, including a military and police force, rule of law, regime or government legitimacy, and effective controls on military and civilian power.<sup>28</sup>

*Economic Development.* Modernization theory provides the theoretical basis for the economic development category, arguing that economic growth is necessary for a target state to strengthen its political institutions.<sup>29</sup> Economic growth is also related to other social and political factors favorable to democracy, including greater access to education, an expanding middle class, and a stronger civil society.<sup>30</sup> With regard to economic development, however, the primary measures are per capita gross domestic product (GDP), literacy, penetration of modern goods, urbanization, and a market-oriented economy.<sup>31</sup>

*Sociocultural Factors.* Social mobilization theory argues that the primary driver of democratization is the rise of an influential middle class that can pressure the political elites to

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<sup>28</sup> James Dobbins, Seth G. Jones, and Keith Crane, *Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007), 189.

<sup>29</sup> Graeme J. Gill, *Dynamics of Democratization* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 2–3. Modernization theory is based on the work of Seymour Lipset and argues that democratization follows increases in “economic development, deepened industrialization, and educational expansion.” Jan Teorell, *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3–4.

<sup>30</sup> Downes and Monten, 104; Enterline and Greig, 335–39.

<sup>31</sup> Downes and Monten, 104; Enterline and Greig, 335–39.

initiate institutional change necessary for democratization.<sup>32</sup> Democratization also requires the development of a mature civil society, capable of self-organizing for collective action and possessing the civic aptitude to contribute to democratic processes.<sup>33</sup> Studies have also shown that democracy is difficult to achieve in states where a high degree of ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity exists.

*Exogenous Factors.* The previous three categories focus on the internal conditions of the target state but studies have shown that external conditions can also affect the likelihood of successful democratization. Previous experience with representative forms of government is one of the most important preconditions for democracy.<sup>34</sup> Experience is likely to have established some of the institutional foundation necessary for democracy to take hold and led the population to hold liberal views and accept democratic norms.<sup>35</sup> The status of neighboring states can also affect democratization prospects in the target state. Huntington's "third wave" describes the domino effect that the successful democratization of neighboring states has on other transitioning states.<sup>36</sup>

## The Military's Role in Forced Democratization

The majority of research on forced democratization focuses on explaining, in terms of pre-conditions or strategy, why past efforts to impose democracy have succeeded or failed. Their goal is to prove that any effort at forced democratization is unlikely to succeed if certain pre-conditions are not present or if specific strategies are not employed. Unfortunately, these studies do little to address the reality that favorable conditions are unlikely to exist in future intervention efforts, especially given that the targets of intervention have likely resisted less drastic efforts at democratization and exhibit enough instability to threaten the national interests of intervening

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<sup>32</sup> Downes and Monten, 104; Enterline and Greig, 335–39.

<sup>33</sup> Dobbins et al., 200; Downes and Monten, 104.

<sup>34</sup> Enterline and Greig, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Downes and Monten, 105.

<sup>36</sup> Dobbins et al., 192–93.

states.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, most research examines a large sample size of case studies in order to establish statistically significant evidence. These studies rely heavily on statistical measures and quantitative data that fail to account for the nuance of individual cases. My research will isolate the variable of military commitment in terms of resources, time, and priority in the United States' efforts to establish democratic governance in South Korea.

## Methodology

This research will consist of a single explanatory case study designed to provide a nuanced, empirically-rich, and holistic account of successful forced democratization. Specifically, the case study will explain how US intervention enabled South Korea to successfully transition to and consolidate democracy despite unfavorable democratic conditions at the onset of intervention. The goal will be to test the hypothesis that forced democratization is unlikely to result in sustainable democracy unless military intervention efforts are sustained until conditions improve to favorable levels, usually implying a multi-decade intervention. The case study will be broken down into three broad categories: 1) Strategic Context; 2) Forced Democratization Strategy; 3) Operational Actions and Progress.

In the first category, the case will look at the strategic context that preceded foreign imposed democratization efforts. The key question will be assessing the degree to which South Korea possessed conditions favorable for democracy. The second category will look at the strategic aims and objectives of the United States. The key question will be identifying the forced democratization strategy employed and determining the military's intended role and objectives within it. Finally, the case study will outline the actions of the United States against established measures of democracy in order to assess progress and establish causal linkages with intervener

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<sup>37</sup> Downes and Monten, 92.

actions. The key questions will be determining the impact of both military action and inaction on democratization.

The South Korea case was chosen specifically because it represents a target state with unfavorable conditions for democratization, while at the same time presenting a great degree of overall success that contrasts with individual periods of significant failure. These characteristics are necessary to focus this study's research on determining exactly how much effort, in terms of influence and duration, is required for forced democratization to succeed. The case will be analyzed according to existing theories on democratization to determine the validity of the study hypothesis.

The study will likely assist military professionals in developing an operational approach that best employs military capability according to the unique strategic context of the targeted state and democratization principles and theory. The conclusions of this research may not have universal applicability given that it is based on a single case, however, its findings may contribute to new strategies for imposing democracy that researchers can test against additional cases.

## Case Study

### South Korea

#### Introduction

Korea has long been a geopolitical focal point in the Far East, as evidenced by its role in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars of 1894-95 and 1904-05, respectively. The latter war led to the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910 and began a brutal 35-year period of Japanese colonial rule in Korea.<sup>38</sup> The United States became involved in the domestic affairs of Korea following Japan's surrender to end World War II in September 1945. The Moscow Agreement was signed three months later, formally binding the United States and the Soviet Union in a trusteeship

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<sup>38</sup> Robert T. Oliver, "The Tragedy of Korea," *World Affairs* 110, no. 1 (1947): 28-29; Jinwung Kim, *A History of Korea: From "Land of the Morning Calm" to States in Conflict* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 322.

committed to the development of democratic self-government in Korea.<sup>39</sup> The agreement marked the official start of forced democratization efforts in US-controlled South Korea and serves as a natural starting point for analysis.

In 1945, Korea was divided into two equal zones, with the Soviets controlling the communist northern zone and the United States controlling the democratic south. The division effectively isolated the industrialized north from the agricultural south, stagnating the Korean economy in the process. Furthermore, the budding Cold War rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States would further sabotage any efforts to unify Korea under the single democratic government promised by the Moscow Agreement. When viewed as a single nation, Korea possessed some favorable conditions for democratization in 1945. Of note, the Korean people developed a strong national identity and desire for independence as a result of years of oppressive Japanese rule. Furthermore, Korean society showed potential for civil aptitude with the emergence of competing political parties and social organizations in the years immediately following the war. Unfortunately, the arbitrary division and Cold-War rivalries made unification impossible, leaving South Korea to democratize alone.

What followed would be a nearly 40-year transition from a weak, unstable anocracy to a fully consolidated democracy.<sup>40</sup> Today, Korea is widely considered one of the strongest and freest democracies in the world. However, its path to democracy was initiated by American intervention and dominated by decades of authoritarian rule. South Korea's successful democratization lends credence to the hypothesis that forced democratization is unlikely to result in sustainable

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<sup>39</sup> "Korea: A Chronology of Principal Events, 1945-50," *The World Today* 6, no. 8 (1950): 319–20. The Moscow Agreement was between the foreign ministers of the United States, Soviet Union, United Kingdom, and China that established a joint U.S.-Soviet commission to establish a provisional Korean government and work with it in the establishment of a national, independent and democratically self-governed Korea within a period of five years.

<sup>40</sup> Monty G. Marshall and Benjamin R. Cole, "Global Report 2014: Conflict, Governance and State Fragility," Center for Systemic Peace, 2014, 21, accessed December 30, 2016, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/globalreport.html>. Anocracy is a hybrid regime type characterized by inconsistent and incoherent governance that reflects features of both autocratic and democratic regimes.

democracy unless military intervention efforts are sustained until conditions improve to favorable levels. In particular, South Korea's backslides toward autocracy coincided with periods of Cold War tension, where the United States was less concerned with South Korea's democratization and more concerned with preventing the spread of communism. Only after US-Soviet relations cooled in the late 1980s and favorable democratic conditions fully developed, did South Korean democratization succeed. This implies that successful forced democratization efforts likely require a decades-long intervention.

### Strategic Context

Korea entered into its post-WWII era of Soviet and American occupation on the heels of 35 years of oppressive Japanese military government. The Korean people were not allowed to serve in positions of government or form political or social organizations. The entire economy was designed to serve Japan's growing needs, first for rice and then, as Japan began mobilizing for WWII, industry. Finally, Japanese attempts to assimilate the Korean people as their subjects nearly eradicated Korean language, culture, and religious practices.<sup>41</sup> All of these factors contributed to an American-controlled South Korea that lacked qualified Koreans to serve in government, a nonexistent economy, and a society unfamiliar with democratic government. Conditions that offered little chance for successful democratization.

### *Government Institutions*

Following the surrender of Japan, the United States established the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) as part of the Moscow Agreement. The initial occupation was well received despite the formation of hostile political groups and other self-governing organizations before the American's arrived. Most of the groups started abroad, where exiles found refuge during Japanese rule, but the American Military Government disbanded all

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<sup>41</sup> Andrea Matles Savada and William Shaw, eds., *South Korea: A Country Study*, 4th ed., Federal Research Division, Library of Congress (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1992), 20–24.

political organizations and ruled South Korea directly in anticipation of a unification agreement with the Soviets.<sup>42</sup> This action frustrated the Korean people who were already eager for independence. After the trusteeship was established, the political divisions intensified further. Leftist communist leaders supported the trusteeship and had a strong following with workers, farmers, and students. However, Americans believed the left was under the control of the Soviets and thus conflicted with US interests. The right-wing camp gained favor from the Americans but their commitment to Korean unification caused them to oppose the trusteeship, which delayed independence.<sup>43</sup>

Japanese rule left most Koreans, aside from former collaborators, with little experience or training to serve in the administrative positions of a democratic government.<sup>44</sup> The Japanese colonial administration relied on its military officers and pro-Japanese collaborators to fill its ranks. After repatriation, the only experienced Koreans were previous Japanese collaborators or exiled nationals, both of whom lacked legitimacy with the Korean people.<sup>45</sup> The police force faced similar issues with legitimacy due to Japanese manning practices. The Korean people despised any remnants of Japanese colonial rule, leaving the Americans in the difficult position of making wholesale changes to the police force while civil unrest reached violent levels due to the economic crisis.

### *Economic Development*

Japanese rule had a disastrous effect on the South Korean economy and its development potential. Japan specifically designed the Korean economy to meet Japanese needs and as such, even the systems and infrastructure established by Japan were difficult to exploit after the

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<sup>42</sup> Savada and Shaw, 27.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 28, 30.

<sup>44</sup> Channing Liem, "United States Rule in Korea," *Far Eastern Survey* 18, no. 7 (1949): 79.

<sup>45</sup> Kim, 372.

relationship between the two economies was severed. In some instances, they even posed significant obstacles to building a self-sufficient economy in South Korea. The Soviet-controlled North possessed nearly all of Korea's heavy industry, natural resources, and power generation capacity, while even the South's light industries were completely dependent on electricity from the North's hydroelectric generators. Furthermore, South Korea's economy was completely agriculturally based and designed to export rice and other raw materials, while relying on imported fertilizers, fuel, and food. To make matters worse, most of South Korea's mines and factories were previously owned by Japan, meaning its departure at the end of WWII left South Korea with a serious lack of indigenous personnel to assume landowning and managerial responsibilities. Consequently, many Koreans were left without work and suffering from severe shortages of food, fuel, and consumer goods.<sup>46</sup> Eventually, the repatriation of displaced Koreans would offset some of these shortfalls, but few had experience with the responsibilities associated with ownership and operation of factories and other industries. At a critical juncture in South Korea's development, it lacked the leadership necessary to facilitate economic growth.

In addition to the structural problems inherent in South Korea's economic system, Japanese and Soviet actions during and immediately following WWII also contributed to the South Korean economy's dismal state. The US-Soviet dispute over Korea's future led the Soviets to force the migration of nearly one million Koreans from the northern zone and into the American zone, while at the same time, about two million Koreans were being repatriated into South Korea from abroad. In total, the South Korean population experienced a 25 percent increase from just over 16 million to over 20 million between 1945 and 1947, more than offsetting the reduced rice demand from Japan and contributing to massive unemployment and social unrest.<sup>47</sup> To make matters worse, the

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<sup>46</sup> Savada and Shaw, 29; Kim, 385.

<sup>47</sup> G. F. H., "Competing Ideologies in Korea," *The World Today* 5, no. 6 (1949): 246; Savada and Shaw, 29; Kim, 387.



Japanese took deliberate steps before the conclusion of WWII to disorganize and disrupt the Korean financial situation after coming to the realization that the war was lost.<sup>48</sup>

The Japanese, knowing they would leave Korea to the Americans, doubled the amount of money in circulation by providing advance salary payments to employees, paying out insurance policies in full, and flooding the market with counterfeit currency. These actions, combined with the serious shortages in food and other consumer goods, led to widespread inflation and economic collapse.<sup>49</sup> Later attempts by the USAMGIK to control inflation through fixed exchange rates and the installation of a free market economy simply compounded the problem.<sup>50</sup>

### *Sociocultural Factors*

South Korean culture and society offered a slight contrast to the unfavorable democratic conditions of the government and economy. Although not reaching ideal levels, South Korean civil society displayed potential as a source of social mobilization, organization, and participation necessary for democratization. In spite of oppressive Japanese colonial rule, Korean civil society never lost its will to resist. Instead, it developed a reputation for fierce opposition to foreign rule and a universal desire for independence.<sup>51</sup> Japanese rule was marked by periodic and often violent Korean uprisings against the colonial government. Koreans even organized into labor unions and other social movements during a brief period of liberal-leaning Japanese government in the early 1920s. These changes were short-lived, as Japan reverted back to its oppressive policies in the lead up to WWII, but the seeds were planted. As evidenced by the rapid rise of political parties post-liberation, Korean civil society demonstrated a willingness and ability to act collectively, essential conditions for democratization.

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<sup>48</sup> J. Earnest Fisher, "Korea Today," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (1946): 266.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>50</sup> Kim, 385.

<sup>51</sup> Kim, 322; Committee No. 21, "Regional Survey: Japan and Korea," CGSC Student Papers (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, April 26, 1946), 13.

Aside from the beginnings of a robust civil society, Japanese occupation did little else to create conditions favorable for Korean democratization. Japan always intended to use Korea to serve only Japanese purposes and its actions reflected that intent. Its policy of assimilation was designed to virtually eliminate all remnants of the Korean culture. All schools were taught in Japanese and Koreans were forbidden from using their native language to speak or write. Free press was eliminated and propaganda promoting the divinity of Japanese rule was the norm.<sup>52</sup> By the end of Japanese occupation, the majority of Koreans who were not Japanese collaborators were illiterate, uneducated, and poor. As a result, Korean society lacked the technical expertise required by a modern industrial state.<sup>53</sup> Japan had effectively eliminated the middle class of Korean society and left a nobility class without legitimacy with the Korean people.<sup>54</sup>

In terms of culture, South Korea was over ninety-seven percent homogenous and influenced by somewhat Western views. The Korean social structure was based on the family, clan, and supremacy of the male. Prominent religions included Shamanism, Confucianism and numerous primitive superstitious beliefs while the “enlightened” religions of Shintoism, Buddhism, and Christianity were held by the educated minority.<sup>55</sup> All of these factors were generally favorable to democratization. None of the ethnic divisions so detrimental to democratic compromise were present within the Korean culture, but that divisiveness was evident in the political and social arenas.

#### *Exogenous Factors*

At the end of WWII, Korea represented the only area of mainland northeast Asia that had not become aligned with communism. By 1947, communist sentiments were gaining traction in

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<sup>52</sup> Savada and Shaw, 23.

<sup>53</sup> David Ekbladh, “How to Build a Nation,” *The Wilson Quarterly*; *Washington* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 14.

<sup>54</sup> Committee No. 21, 13.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

China, as the Nationalist Party of Chang Kai-shek was on the verge of collapse, and the Soviet Union was simultaneously consolidating its control over North Korea.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, the United States remained preoccupied with the future of Europe's eastern bloc countries, initially electing to focus its containment efforts on the European theater with aid contributions to anti-communist governments, involvement in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and strengthening western occupation zones. In Korea, the United States remained devoted to a unified and independent Korea, as defined by the Allied trusteeship of December 1945. Consequently, the United States was reluctant to develop long-term plans for South Korean occupation and by 1949, had withdrawn completely from South Korea.<sup>57</sup>

These conditions did not bode well for Korea's democratization prospects and eventually contributed to North Korea's decision to invade South Korea in June 1950. However, the Korean War and the Chinese Communist Party victory in the Chinese Civil war rebalanced US interests to northeast Asia. The Korean War demonstrated the seriousness of the North Korean threat and the cost associated with communist perceptions of lacking US resolve. The persistent threat posed by communist-backed North Korea served the cross purposes of ensuring sustained US commitment to South Korean security while simultaneously reducing the United States' incentive to impose a truly democratic government there.

### Forced Democratization Strategy

The United States only formally occupied South Korea for three years after it established a US Military Government there at the end of WWII. What began as a temporary trusteeship, designed to establish a democratic and independent Korea within five years, evolved into a decades-long forced democratization effort that cost the United States billions of dollars and whose effects persist even today. Between the initial US occupation in September 1945 and South Korea's

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<sup>56</sup> Savada and Shaw, 27.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 27, 31.

successful transition to democracy in the early 1990s, US policy in South Korea went through three distinct phases: *Occupation Phase*, *Security Phase*, and *Consolidation Phase*. Each phase roughly corresponds to a change in how South Korea fit into the United States' balance of interests. The *occupation phase* covers the post-WWII reconstruction efforts of the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) up to the start of the Korean War. The *security phase* includes the Korean War and extends through the first direct election of a South Korean president in 1987. The *consolidation phase* encompasses the rapid trend toward greater democratization from 1987 to the presidential election of 1992, when South Korea elected its first civilian president in over 30 years.<sup>58</sup>

The *occupation phase* was defined by the United States' two fundamental policies in Korea. First, it sought to establish a free and unified Korean government in keeping with the December 1945 Moscow Agreement. Second, it held equally important that South Korea remain a noncommunist abutment of its communist competitor to the north.<sup>59</sup> The agreement, which also included the United Kingdom and China, formally bound the United States and the Soviet Union in a trusteeship committed to the development of democratic self-government in Korea.<sup>60</sup> As such, the US Government never considered its commitment to Korea as long-term. Instead, it viewed its role as more of a caretaker.

During this phase, the United States struggled to clearly define its objectives and approach. Adherence to the Moscow Agreement required the cooperation of the Soviet Union and the popular support of the Korean people. The United States would get neither. Most South Koreans, particularly rightists, rejected the trusteeship as an unnecessary delay in independence and the Soviets demanded that those opposed to the trusteeship be excluded from any future Korean

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<sup>58</sup> Denise Youngblood-Coleman, "Country Review: South Korea," CountryWatch, 2016, 11–12, accessed January 26, 2017, <http://www.countrywatch.com/Content/pdfs/reviews/B3LZ9M95.01c.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> Kim, 374; Ekbladh, 14.

<sup>60</sup> "Korea: A Chronology," 319–20.

government. As a result, the United States found itself at cross purposes. On one hand, it advocated for Korean independence, but on the other hand, it refused to accept Korea as a communist extension of the Soviet Union. In an attempt to do both, the United States established a separate South Korean government and consolidated power with conservative Koreans. In the process, the United States alienated much of the population and eliminated any chance of reunification despite successful reforms to agriculture and land ownership, public health and welfare, education, and law and order.<sup>61</sup>

The *security phase* marked a substantial evolution of American policy, particularly with regard to communism. Prior to the Korean War, US policy was characterized by significant tensions and a perceived threat of war with the Soviet Union, but those characteristics did not elicit the degree of defense spending and anti-communist sentiment that would come to define American policy during the Cold War.<sup>62</sup> The Korean War would become the impetus for those developments. During this phase, the United States became increasingly preoccupied with halting communist expansion and preserving regional security. Consequently, the United States would sustain its presence in South Korea both economically and militarily with those two goals in mind and even at the cost of democratic development.<sup>63</sup>

The *consolidation phase* encompasses the rapid trend toward greater democratization between 1987 and 1992 that saw South Korea transition from an autocracy to a democracy in just five years.<sup>64</sup> During this period the United States transitioned from Ronald Reagan's unabashedly

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<sup>61</sup> Liem, 77–78; Ekbladh, 14; Kim, 371.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24, no. 4 (1980): 564.

<sup>63</sup> Martin Hart-Landsberg, *Korea: Division, Reunification, and US Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 16.

<sup>64</sup> "Polity IV Country Reports 2010: South Korea," Center for Systemic Peace, 2010, 1, accessed January 26, 2017, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/p4creports.html>.

anti-communist foreign policy to George H.W. Bush's moderate pragmatism.<sup>65</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany marked the end of the Cold War and opened the door for the United States to leverage its relationship with both Koreas in order to maintain regional dominance in East Asia and influence the democratic development of one of its most important allies.

## Operational Actions and Progress

### *Occupation Phase*

In the days leading up to Japan's surrender, left-leaning social organizations began to establish interim forms of government throughout the Korean peninsula. Led by ardent anti-Japanese nationalist Yŏ Un-hyŏng, the Korean People's Republic (KPR) was formally established on September 6, 1945. Although primarily leftist, it included representation of all political persuasions, as evidenced by its election of right-wing anticommunist leader, Syngman Rhee, as cabinet president.<sup>66</sup> Rhee would decline the offer, but his inclusion indicated that despite the KPR's leftist approach, it aimed to establish a functioning national coalition and represented the overall interests of the Korean people.<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately, the United States perceived its left-leaning ideals as evidence of Soviet influence and actively attempted to subvert it.<sup>68</sup>

In September 1945, General Douglas MacArthur announced that the United States had assumed control and authority in South Korea by formally establishing the USAMGIK.<sup>69</sup> Lieutenant General John Hodge and the 24<sup>th</sup> Corps out of Okinawa were tasked with occupying the US-controlled zone and accepting Japan's surrender, but MacArthur did not provide guidance on

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<sup>65</sup> Chae-Jin Lee, *A Troubled Peace: US Policy and the Two Koreas* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 3–5.

<sup>66</sup> Kim, 369.

<sup>67</sup> Hart-Landsberg, 65–66.

<sup>68</sup> Kim, 369.

<sup>69</sup> "Korea: A Chronology," 319.

how to proceed with the business of rebuilding the Korean government.<sup>70</sup> In Japan, MacArthur outlined a detailed and methodical approach for disarmament and democratization that incorporated a deep understanding of Japanese history and culture. In Korea, General Hodge was given only a “Basic Initial Directive” filled with contradictions. It called for the respect of the Korean people’s right to organize and assemble, while at the same time emphasizing the need to establish US military control over all aspects of government by abolishing any activities counter to those aims.<sup>71</sup> Without a clear picture of how to move forward, Hodge chose to maintain Japanese colonial institutions while the USAMGIK could take shape.

Unsurprisingly, Koreans opposed vigorously any form of continued Japanese control and Hodge was forced to quickly replace all Japanese officials with US military personnel. However, the damage was already done. Fierce opposition and instability threatened the American zone and more importantly, US authority in the south.<sup>72</sup> To make matters worse, the USAMGIK continued to rely on Japanese officials as advisors rather than arresting them or returning them to Japan. In instances where Koreans did replace them, they came on recommendation from or positions of wealth within, the Japanese colonial government.<sup>73</sup> Either circumstance did little to legitimize the military government in the eyes of Koreans or to curb the persistent cycle of violence that emerged as a result of their dissatisfaction.<sup>74</sup> The latter of which contributed to Hodge’s perception that the “Korean people [were] the enemy of the United States” and shaped American priorities in the initial stages of occupation.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Kim, 370.

<sup>71</sup> Lee, 21.

<sup>72</sup> Kim, 370; Hart-Landsberg, 70–71.

<sup>73</sup> Hart-Landsberg, 72.

<sup>74</sup> Lee, 22.

<sup>75</sup> Hart-Landsberg, 71.

US fears that leftist revolutionary sentiment in the American zone could lead to communist domination forced the USAMGIK to focus on bolstering its support of anticommunist conservative leadership.<sup>76</sup> As a result, a fierce divide developed between leftist political groups like the KPR and their conservative opposition. The Korean Democratic Party (KDP) was the strongest right-leaning party to develop during US occupation and when it became clear that the United States would maintain control of South Korea, the KDP organized against the KPR and voiced its support for the military government. Together with its members' strong affiliation with the Japanese colonial government, the KDP became the USAMGIK's preferred ruling party.<sup>77</sup> When Hodge created the 11-person Korean Advisory Council in response to public outrage over continued Japanese presence, it did not include a single leftist member.<sup>78</sup> Hodge continued his efforts to subvert left-leaning political groups by disbanding the people's committees that developed under the KPR and ignoring the KPR's claim as the legitimate Korean government.<sup>79</sup>

To further their claims at legitimacy, the USAMGIK and the KDP co-opted notable Korean leaders from the Korean Provisional Government (KPG) to fill positions within the military government.<sup>80</sup> Syngman Rhee, a past leader in the KPG, became the Americans' choice to lead the KDP and the USAMGIK introduced him in October 1945. Rhee was selected because, unlike the majority of KDP and KPG members, he was fiercely anticommunist in addition being anti-Japanese and conservative.<sup>81</sup> Left-leaning political groups in both zones responded by declaring solidarity with the KPR and organizing grass roots support among workers but these actions only confirmed

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<sup>76</sup> Kim, 374.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 369–71.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 371. The KPR leader Yŏ Un-hyŏng was selected for membership but refused to participate because he felt it the council did not represent Korean interests.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 371, 376.

<sup>80</sup> The KPG was established in China as the anti-Japanese, nationalist Korean government during Japanese colonial occupation and its members had high standing in the Korean community.

<sup>81</sup> Hart-Landsberg, 74.



long-held US beliefs about communist infiltration of those groups and heightened its concern for maintaining law and order.<sup>82</sup>

In October 1945, the USAMGIK established the Korean National Police (KNP) and three months later, established what would later become the South Korean Army (SKA).<sup>83</sup> To fill the ranks of the KNP and SKA, the USAMGIK had to overcome a familiar obstacle: an inadequately skilled and inexperienced population. Only those with previous experience in the colonial police force or the Japanese military had the requisite qualifications for service and consequently, they dominated the ranks of each.<sup>84</sup> When coupled with a rightist-heavy Korean Advisory Council and an American military preoccupied with reinforcing conservative support against communism, the KNP became a powerful tool for leftist suppression.

The Soviets responded to the USAMGIK's pro-right political reforms by placing communist leaders at the head of all political bodies in the north.<sup>85</sup> These actions sowed deep feelings of mistrust between the United States and the Soviet Union and highlighted how each side valued enduring regional influence over Korean unification. Without cooperation, the US-Soviet Joint Commission had little chance of creating the provisional Korean Government outlined in the Moscow Agreement.

As the Joint Commission's prospects dwindled, the USAMGIK scheduled October 1946 elections for the South Korean Interim Legislative Assembly (SKILA), which would serve as the advisory body for the USAMGIK and the basis for the South Korean Interim Government in the

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<sup>82</sup> Hart-Landsberg, 74–75; Kim, 371.

<sup>83</sup> Robert K. Sawyer, *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAG in Peace and War*, ed. Walter G. Hermes, Army Historical Series: Center of Military History (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1988), 41; Kim, 371. In November 1948 the ROK Armed Forces Act was passed, formally reorganizing the South Korean Constabulary into the SKA.

<sup>84</sup> Kim, 371–72.

<sup>85</sup> Hart-Landsberg, 79.

event the Joint Commission failed.<sup>86</sup> Leaving nothing to chance, General Hodge personally appointed half of the SKILA's 90-member assembly, virtually guaranteeing rightist control. By December 1946, rightists controlled decision making on nearly every major issue within the SKILA.<sup>87</sup> The USAMGIK had successfully laid the groundwork for a separate southern government and with the KNP, possessed the means to suppress communist opposition.

The southern communists' response was extremely violent and between February and April 1948, a series of strikes, demonstrations, and outright attacks broke out across South Korea.<sup>88</sup> The Rhee government violently suppressed the opposition and used the crisis to purge communist sympathizers from positions of influence.<sup>89</sup> By the end of 1949, the South Korean government had taken into custody nearly thirty thousand political prisoners, almost double the number held by the Japanese just four years earlier.<sup>90</sup> These numbers highlight the significant disconnect between the United States' desire to maintain South Korea as a bulwark against communism and its stated goal of establishing a unified and democratic Korea.<sup>91</sup>

To get to this point, the USAMGIK had to overcome significant obstacles, not the least of which being the dismal state of the Korean education system.<sup>92</sup> The Japanese-designed education system needed to be completely revamped and the USAMGIK took great pains to improve both access to and the quality of South Korean education. It implemented a US-modeled public school system that provided free, universal access to education up to the sixth-grade level and opened opportunities for secondary schooling and graduate-level education as well.<sup>93</sup> In terms of quality,

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<sup>86</sup> Hart-Landsberg, 75.

<sup>87</sup> Kim, 375.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 380.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 399.

<sup>90</sup> Hart-Landsberg, 77.

<sup>91</sup> Kim, 372.

<sup>92</sup> Ekbladh, 14.

<sup>93</sup> Liem, 390.

the USAMGIK replaced the Japanese curriculum with one focused on producing future-oriented skills and technological advancement. These changes cultivated a more Western worldview within South Korean society and set in motion the changes necessary for a stable, democratic Korean state to emerge.<sup>94</sup>

By the end of US occupation, the population of students with elementary and secondary educations had doubled and tripled, respectively.<sup>95</sup> The USAMGIK also made great progress in economic areas such as land reform and the prevention of widespread starvation despite severe grain shortages that followed US and Soviet occupation. When the Americans arrived in South Korea, they inherited an agrarian economy where over 74 percent of the population was engaged in agricultural production.<sup>96</sup> Deteriorating relations between the United States and Soviet Union, as well as the influx of refugees and displaced persons led to severe food shortages and increased pressure on the USAMGIK to improve the existing land tenure system.

The USAMGIK first took ownership of all previously Japanese-held farmlands. Then, in late 1945, it established the New Korea Company to manage its redistribution to tenant farmers. Given US concerns about expanding communist influence and the widespread appeal of communal ownership among peasant farmers, the USAMGIK made land reform a priority.<sup>97</sup> The USAMGIK also placed caps on the size of farmland holdings to prevent the unequal distribution of those lands to wealthy landowners. Without these improvements, it is unlikely that the economic and industrial growth experienced in South Korea during American occupation would have been possible.<sup>98</sup>

Despite these accomplishments, the USAMGIK was still unable to completely revive the South Korean economy or create conditions for sustainable growth. To offset these issues, the

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<sup>94</sup> Ekbladh, 14.

<sup>95</sup> Kim, 390.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 388.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 389.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 390.

United States signed aid agreements with the ROK government that provided nearly \$350 million in aid through the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA).<sup>99</sup> The ECA was initially created to implement the Marshall Plan in Europe but eventually expanded its role in Asia as the fall of Nationalist China increased the communist threat in the region.<sup>100</sup> However, the rising threat of communism and the instability of the ROK government did little to change the view in Washington that the United States should withdraw its troops from South Korea.

The Soviets also pressured the United States to withdraw its troops, but for different reasons. In response to the creation of the Republic of Korea, the Soviets stood up the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and agreed to withdraw its occupation forces by the end of 1948.<sup>101</sup> The DPRK was stronger politically than South Korea, allowing it to focus on building its military rather than its police force. Economically, it possessed the vast majority of both heavy industry and electrical power supply on the Korean peninsula. As a result, the Soviets could withdraw from North Korea with confidence that the North Korean regime would survive. The United States did not have that luxury. Without US presence in South Korea, the continued existence of the ROK was uncertain. South Korean President Syngman Rhee expressed this sentiment on numerous occasions, including a letter to President Truman on November 19, 1948.<sup>102</sup>

Despite South Korean pleas, the United States decided in March 1949 to fully withdraw its troops from South Korea and by the end of June, only a small Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG) remained.<sup>103</sup> In Washington, South Korea was a falling priority in the United States' global strategy.<sup>104</sup> The South Korean government's growing assertiveness toward North Korea,

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<sup>99</sup> "Korea: A Chronology," 324.

<sup>100</sup> Ekbladh, 15–16.

<sup>101</sup> Kim, 396–97.

<sup>102</sup> Lee, 24.

<sup>103</sup> Kim, 401.

<sup>104</sup> Lee, 25.

reflected in its initiation of large-scale border conflicts and President Rhee's calls for a "March North," worried the United States that further military support would embolden Rhee to invade North Korea.<sup>105</sup> To alleviate this concern, the United States tempered its support to South Korea, culminating in Secretary Acheson's exclusion of South Korea from the United States' Asian defensive perimeter during a speech to the National Press Club on January 12, 1950.<sup>106</sup>

The United States entered Korea viewing its role as that of a temporary steward of democracy and independence. The Moscow Agreement's structure and content convey the temporary nature of the planned US occupation, as well as the American desire for Korean independence. But US fears of communist domination in Korea caused the USAMGIK to implement policies that undermined its commitment to democratic principles and the Joint Commission's chance for success. When the last US troops left Korea on 30 June 1949, the United States had failed to achieve any of the requirements outlined by the Moscow Agreement. In fact, US and Soviet occupation policies effectively eliminated the possibility of Korean unification. The United States did succeed in solidifying its influence on the Korean peninsula and its decision to place its national interests ahead of its ideological commitment to democracy reflect its pursuit of that outcome.

### *Security Phase*

When the United States left South Korea, it was still operating in accordance with President Truman's March 12, 1947 declaration "to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."<sup>107</sup> At the time, US support rarely included military force. Germany, Japan, and South Korea were the exceptions. The Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) reflected Europe's primacy in the United

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<sup>105</sup> Kim, 401.

<sup>106</sup> Lee, 25.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 24. The Truman Doctrine sought to contain communism through the provision of military and financial aid to threatened nations.

States' balance of interests. Asia was a secondary priority but still important to the American containment strategy. South Korea, however, was seen as a military liability due to its unfavorable geographic position, which is why the United States sought a way to extricate itself militarily.<sup>108</sup>

The North Koreans interpreted the United States' disengagement as a sign that it would not intervene to defend South Korea, but the Americans rightly assumed that the Soviets backed the North Korean invasion and quickly came to South Korea's defense. The United States viewed the invasion as a direct challenge to the American "position as protector of South Korea."<sup>109</sup> It also increased fears of a communist "domino effect," forcing the United States to stand up militarily to communist aggression in South Korea regardless of its geographic importance. The Korean War altered the calculus of the American containment strategy. Preserving US credibility in the fight against communism now required a strong response wherever communist threats emerged.

The Korean War was one of the most expensive in US history and its cost, in terms of both blood and treasure, heightened the United States' desire to avoid full-scale conflict in the future. This desire was often in tension with the security concerns of allies such as South Korea, necessitating diplomatic concessions and limiting US influence on the internal affairs of their client states. The United States' struggle to balance its aversion to war with the security concerns of South Korea would define the US-ROK relationship during the *security phase*, ensuring that despite remarkable improvement to the South Korean economy and an increasingly politically-minded population, little progress was made towards democratization.

The evolution of US objectives during the Korean War and President Rhee's initial refusal to accept the Korean Armistice Agreement provide the first instance of this tension. The initial objective of the US-led United Nations Command in Korea was to "repel the armed attack [and]

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<sup>108</sup> Lee, 24.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 26–27.

restore international peace and security in the area.”<sup>110</sup> In keeping with original UN aims, the United States would pursue reunification as a means for restoring peace and security to the Korean peninsula. As the war progressed, reunification became increasingly less likely. China’s commitment of ground forces and US concern about Soviet ambitions in Europe convinced the United States that it needed to seek an alternative to “total victory” in Korea.<sup>111</sup>

With the United States focused on ending the Korean War through political means, President Rhee was free to implement constitutional changes to consolidate power and ensure his regime’s survival. However, the economy remained too weak to function without significant foreign contributions.<sup>112</sup> Between 1953 and 1961, the United States contributed over \$4 billion in financial aid but also took control of South Korean economic decision-making by establishing the United States Operations Mission (USOM). Through USOM, the United States pushed South Korea to adopt a free market economy despite Rhee’s objections that the US was exerting excessive influence.<sup>113</sup> Ultimately, Rhee lacked the leverage and desire to negotiate a different arrangement given the overwhelming benefit of American aid.

Rhee entered the March 1960 elections with almost no popular support following seven years of maladministration, corruption, and dictatorial policy. When both Rhee and his protégée Yi Ki-bung won the presidency and vice presidency in the heavily rigged elections of 1960, the results were met with violent protests throughout South Korea.<sup>114</sup> Student protestors flooded the streets in massive numbers, beginning in the coastal city of Masan and spreading north through Taegu and into Seoul. The April Revolution riots threatened the stability of the Rhee government, which asked for and received permission from General Carter Magruder (Commander in Chief of United

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<sup>110</sup> Lee, 28.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>112</sup> Kim, 426.

<sup>113</sup> Lee, 41–42.

<sup>114</sup> Kim, 427.

Nations Command in Korea), to deploy South Korean troops to quell the violence and enforce martial law.<sup>115</sup> Martial law failed to stop the protests and on 19 April, the violence reached its peak. Thirty thousand student protestors marched to the presidential mansion in Seoul, where Korean police fired on the crowd, killing more than one hundred protesters.<sup>116</sup> In total, the April Revolution cost the lives of four hundred students and forced the United States to assume a more direct role in the domestic affairs of South Korea.

The US embassy and the Eisenhower administration could no longer afford to ignore the abuses of the Rhee administration and began pressuring Rhee to resign. On 26 April, Rhee resigned, enabling the National Assembly to make sweeping changes to the constitution that created a bicameral parliamentary system and made the prime minister its head of the state.<sup>117</sup> The new government was widely praised by the United States for its democratic improvements but did little to address the extreme poverty, unemployment, and serious food shortages that still plagued South Korea. Without improvements in those areas, democratic reform would remain an afterthought for the majority of South Koreans.<sup>118</sup>

Under the circumstances, the new Korean administration had little chance to succeed. North Korea took advantage of South Korean unrest by ramping up its communist unification efforts. These developments did not sit well with the South Korean military, which was opposed to increased economic and political ties with North Korea given its Korean War experience.<sup>119</sup> On 16 May 1961, Major General Park Chung-hee overthrew the new ROK government in a bloodless coup that ended South Korea's brief experiment with democracy. The United States initially opposed the military takeover, but the Korean public showed little opposition to the coup and Park

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<sup>115</sup> Lee, 42–43.

<sup>116</sup> Hart-Landsberg, 177; Kim, 428.

<sup>117</sup> Kim, 428–29; Lee, 45.

<sup>118</sup> Kim, 430–31.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.



was quick to demonstrate his receptiveness to American guidance.<sup>120</sup> As a result, the United States came to view Park's military dictatorship positively, demonstrating again that the United States' commitment to democracy was less important than the survival of the containment system.<sup>121</sup>

Park's military regime is often characterized as a "golden age" in South Korea's history. During his reign, the country experienced remarkable economic growth, rapid modernization, and improved access to higher education.<sup>122</sup> However, South Korea also experienced its most significant backslide from democracy. Park was essentially a dictator, controlling all aspects of the Korean economy and society.<sup>123</sup> He maintained power by focusing on economic growth and employing repressive tactics to limit individual freedoms, censor the media, and skillfully undermine the antigovernment movements of students and intellectuals.<sup>124</sup> All of this was made possible by rising tension in the US-South Korea relationship that coincided with President Nixon's reassessment of the containment system.<sup>125</sup>

Early in the Vietnam War, the national interests of South Korea and the United States were roughly aligned, leading to a thriving relationship. During the Kennedy administration and Johnson's thereafter, the United States poured economic and military aid into South Korea and strongly affirmed its defense obligations.<sup>126</sup> South Korea reciprocated by contributing nearly fifty thousand troops to the Vietnam War. However, US-South Korean cooperation in the fight against communism provoked North Korean militancy, culminating in the seizure of the USS *Pueblo* and a failed commando raid of President Park's residence in January 1968.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Lee, 49, 52.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>122</sup> Hart-Landsberg, 180.

<sup>123</sup> Kim, 436.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 437–38.

<sup>125</sup> Lee, 64–65.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 56.

The United States took no military action against North Korea in response. It simply could not afford to start another war in Korea with Vietnam still ongoing and the *Pueblo* crew hanging in the balance. South Korean politicians saw the North Korean raid as a serious violation that merited a punitive response and were further dissatisfied when excluded from negotiations with North Korea.<sup>128</sup> In order to alleviate South Korean concerns, the United States agreed to provide an additional \$100 million in aid and outfit the South Korean military with modern weapons and equipment, including fighter aircraft.<sup>129</sup> The *Pueblo* incident was indicative of a recurring pattern where US attempts to avoid being drawn into another major war gave South Korea reason to doubt the reliability of the United States' security guarantee. This tension worsened the US-South Korea relationship, but more importantly, reduced US leverage to pressure President Park on issues of democratic reform and human rights, further delaying South Korea's transition to democracy.

When Richard Nixon assumed the presidency in 1969, he introduced a realist foreign policy that relied on balance of power logic to obtain international stability. That strategy sought improved relations with China and the reduction of US forces in Asia as part of the Guam Doctrine.<sup>130</sup> In South Korea, this meant the phased withdrawal of Seventh Infantry Division and the movement of US forces away from the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Nixon presented his force reduction plans to South Korea as a *fait accompli* despite language in the mutual defense treaty that stipulated mutual agreement on force disposition changes.<sup>131</sup> This alone would have been enough to further strain the US-South Korea relationship and lead to additional concessions in

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<sup>128</sup> Lee, 58–59.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>130</sup> The Guam Doctrine affirmed U.S. defense commitments in Asia but called on “the Asian nations themselves” to establish a collective security system to solve internal security and defense requirements short of those involving nuclear powers. Ibid., 64, 67.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 69.

democratization, but the situation became even more complicated when North Korea shot down a US EC-121 spy plane, killing its entire 31-person crew.

Although he had been extremely critical of President Johnson's non-response to the USS *Pueblo* incident, Nixon faced similar challenges with the EC-121 disaster.<sup>132</sup> Like Johnson before him, Nixon elected not to take any action militarily against North Korea. His decision gave South Korea serious reservations as to the United States' ability to defend it against a North Korean invasion. In response, Park took steps to accelerate his efforts to modernize the military and garner support from pro-Seoul legislators in Washington to oppose the proposed troop reductions and procure additional US aid.<sup>133</sup>

At the same time, Nixon's policy of détente toward China began in earnest. The two sides agreed to work together towards improved inter-Korean relations and eventual reunification.<sup>134</sup> Chinese and American cooperation spurred both North and South Korea to resume dialogue but the increased prospect of peaceful reunification also led each side to take drastic measures to solidify their regimes domestically. In the North, Kim Il Sung's position as premier was upgraded to president, while in the South, President Park imposed martial law and introduced a Yushin Constitution that granted him indefinite tenure and absolute power.<sup>135</sup> Again, the United States' pursuit of national interests had indirectly enabled South Korea to drift further away from the democratic government originally envisioned for it.

After a brief period of relational improvement under President Ford, US-South Korea relations nearly reached a breaking point during the Carter administration. Appealing to antiwar and

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<sup>132</sup> Lee, 66.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 67, 70.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 72–73.

<sup>135</sup> Kim, 468–69. The Yushin Constitution made the president all-powerful and was justified by Park as a way to increase government efficiency, build national strength, and promote growth in order to achieve unification.

isolationist sentiments in the United States, Carter planned to double-down on Nixon's Guam Doctrine by withdrawing all US ground forces from South Korea over a five year period.<sup>136</sup> He also believed that US foreign policy should reflect high moral principles and demanded the same commitment from its allies.<sup>137</sup> Carter's proposed Korea policy had little appeal to the South Korean government, but aside from the human rights emphasis, it presented much of the same challenges Nixon's policy did before it. However, domestic circumstances in both countries had changed significantly since 1969, making compromise difficult to achieve.

By 1976, South Korea's economic improvement was being hailed as an "East Asian miracle" and a source of pride for the United States given its failure to achieve success in Vietnam.<sup>138</sup> President Park's successive Five-Year Economic Development Plans transformed the South Korean economy into one that was self-reliant, modern, and highly industrialized. Between 1960 and 1976, per capita income increased from \$94 to \$1,000 and the average annual GNP growth rate increased from eight percent during the First Five-Year Economic Development Plan (1962-1966) to twelve percent during the Second Five-Year Plan.<sup>139</sup> This led to the rapid urbanization of South Korean society and the expansion of its middle class, both favorable conditions for democratization. Urbanization also increased popular demand for higher education and although the Park government often clashed with students over their political views, it did not hinder access to education. By 1980, 95 percent of eligible students were attending junior secondary and senior high school, a vast improvement from 1966.<sup>140</sup> Given the role students played

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<sup>136</sup> Lee, 81, 86, 88.

<sup>137</sup> US Department of State, "Carter's Foreign Policy," *A Short History of the Department of State*, Office of the Historian, accessed March 19, 2017, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/carter>.

<sup>138</sup> Ekbladh, 20.

<sup>139</sup> Hart-Landsberg, 182; Kim, 442.

<sup>140</sup> J. Bruce Jacobs, "Taiwan and South Korea: Comparing East Asia's Two 'Third-Wave' Democracies," *Issues & Studies* 43, no. 4 (December 2007): 244.

in President Rhee's resignation and Carter's commitment to moral values, the conditions appeared set for South Korea to democratize.

Carter's victory in the 1976 presidential election surprised South Korea, but there was no confusion about his policy aims, which he made very clear during the campaign.<sup>141</sup> In his first month in office, Carter announced his intention to "phase down [US] ground forces" in South Korea and delayed meeting with President Park until significant improvements were made to human rights conditions in South Korea.<sup>142</sup> Despite the lack of direct communication, negotiations over Carter's proposed US troop withdrawals followed a similar pattern to those between Nixon and Park years earlier.

To alleviate President Park's concerns over US withdrawals, President Carter promised to assist with South Korean's military modernization program. In response, President Park emphasized the critical deterrent role of US ground forces by highlighting the North's overwhelming military advantage when compared to the South Korean armed forces.<sup>143</sup> As the Carter administration finalized the details of the withdrawal plan, President Park did the same with his list of demands. In July, the two sides agreed to the general framework of a withdrawal plan that called for the removal of two US brigades and their associated support by June 1980. Carter also agreed to meet Park's requests for an advanced military assistance package prior to the first troop withdrawal and that the United States maintain its tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea.<sup>144</sup>

However, unlike President Nixon before him, Carter did not have domestic support for his foreign policy agenda. His Korea policy was widely opposed by Republican leaders and the military community. Even top Democrats expressed concern that Carter came to his decision

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<sup>141</sup> Lee, 82.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 81, 84.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 87–88.

without properly considering the risk.<sup>145</sup> When the House Committee on Armed Services concluded that the withdrawal of US ground forces from South Korea posed serious risks to national security, Carter had no choice but to suspend his plans indefinitely.<sup>146</sup> The South Koreans welcomed the news but without a US withdrawal, Carter no longer had any reason to compromise on human rights.

In a complete reversal, the United States began to increase its military strength on the Korean peninsula. The two countries established the Combined Forces Command (CFC) to replace the dissolved United Nations Command, preserving US operational control of the South Korean armed forces.<sup>147</sup> President Carter also capitalized on normalized relations with China by working with them to gain assurances that North Korea would not attack. Carter now had significant leverage in his dealings with President Park and began to press him both publicly and privately about his repressive policies. During a visit to South Korea in June 1979, Carter met personally with opposition political leaders such as Kim Young-sam and demanded that President Park release political prisoners.<sup>148</sup>

At the same time, deteriorating economic conditions in South Korea limited President Park's negotiating power. While conditions were good, most Koreans were content to ignore Park's oppressive policies, but with rising inflation and a sputtering economy, the opposition movement gained momentum. In discussions with President Carter, even South Korea's rapid economic growth became a source of contention.<sup>149</sup> Amidst growing domestic unrest and increasingly hostile relations with the United States, Park was assassinated on 18 October 1979 by a member of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA).

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<sup>145</sup> Lee, 86–87.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 92–93.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 92.

The assassination gave way to political instability and was met with suspicions of US complicity. The former increased concern of North Korean opportunism, while the latter made the Carter administration reluctant to influence constitutional reform despite the clear opportunity.<sup>150</sup> The situation took a familiar turn when Major General Chun Doo Hwan initiated a coup d'état and took control of political and military power within the civilian government under interim President Choi Kyu-ha. The United States' decision to take a hands-off approach and Chun's decision to maintain the façade of civilian control enabled the new military regime to take significant action against pro-democracy momentum in South Korea.

In May 1980, pro-democracy demonstrations broke out in cities all over South Korea.<sup>151</sup> Like Presidents Park and Rhee before him, Chun violently suppressed the student rebellions using military force, culminating in the Kwangju massacre of 240 civilian demonstrators.<sup>152</sup> The US Army, by way of the CFC, gave tacit approval for the use of military force to "retake" Kwangju. Chun capitalized on the United States' reluctance to speak out publicly against the his new government by publicly proclaiming US support for his actions.<sup>153</sup> The incident had serious ramifications on South Korea's democratization prospects as well as the United States' reputation among young South Koreans. Democracy took another step backwards as Chun further consolidated his powers through anti-democratic constitutional changes and a "purification campaign" to rid South Korea of all opposition groups.<sup>154</sup>

For the rest of the Carter presidency, the United States' influence in South Korea was limited. Despite its leverage as a security guarantor and economic partner, it refrained from taking significant action against the Chun government for fear of permanently alienating the Korean

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<sup>150</sup> Lee., 104–5.

<sup>151</sup> Kim, 475.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 476.

<sup>153</sup> Hart-Landsberg, 191.

<sup>154</sup> Kim, 477.

people.<sup>155</sup> Chun officially retired from the military in August of 1980 and was formally elected president in October, officially ending Choi's puppet government and marking the start of Chun's seven-year presidential term.<sup>156</sup> The relationship remained tense until the election of President Reagan, who returned to the staunch anti-communist foreign policy that defined the United States' Cold War agenda before Carter's brief departure.

Reagan restored South Korean confidence in the United States through his candid and consistent support of President Chun and the "special bond of freedom and friendship" that existed between the two allies.<sup>157</sup> During Reagan's first term, he developed a relationship with President Chun built on mutual trust and respect, features that were nonexistent between Carter and Park. Reagan was careful to avoid publicly undermining Chun on questions of human rights and offered tangible support to South Korea when it experienced several significant crises in 1983.

Reagan was quick to congratulate Chun on his election in February 1981 and equally important, Reagan downplayed the release of political prisoners, such as prominent opposition leader Kim Dae-jung, to avoid energizing the South Korean opposition party.<sup>158</sup> The United States also gave full support to South Korea in response to the shooting of a Korean commercial jet by Soviet fighter aircraft on September 1, 1983. The United States sparked a flurry of activity within the United Nations calling for an investigation into its causes and condemning the Soviet Union for its role in the incident. Finally, after North Korean commandos blew up the Martyrs' Mausoleum in Burma during a failed attempt to assassinate President Chun, President Reagan personally visited South Korea to express the United States' continued commitment to South Korea in the face of recent tragic events, and to encourage Park to resist the temptation to retaliate militarily.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Lee, 107; Hart-Landsberg, 191.

<sup>156</sup> Kim, 477.

<sup>157</sup> Lee, 112,114.

<sup>158</sup> Lee, 115–16; Kim, 478.

<sup>159</sup> Lee, 119–20.



With US credibility restored, Reagan was better able to influence Chun in areas where previous US presidents were forced to make concessions. In terms of economics, South Korea's emergence as one of the United States' most important trading partners led to inevitable tensions between the two countries on issues of trade, but the United States' protectionists practices never led to serious disagreement and Reagan's reelection in 1984 was well received in South Korea.<sup>160</sup> In the arena of democratization, President Reagan began, in 1986, to pursue a policy of "quiet diplomacy" towards South Korea in an effort to improve human rights and promote democratic progress.<sup>161</sup>

Reagan carefully balanced private overtures to Chun, encouraging him to follow-through on his pledge to peacefully transfer power in the 1987 election, with public support for Chun's anti-communist government. Amidst pressure from Reagan and growing opposition within South Korea, Chun enabled the National Assembly to pursue constitutional modifications allowing for the direct election of the president.<sup>162</sup> When it appeared that opposition support for either Kim Dae-jung or Kim Young-sam could prevent Chun's preferred successor, Roh Tae-woo, from winning a direct election, Chun reneged on his willingness change to the electoral process.<sup>163</sup> Chun's actions sparked nationwide protests and increased the likelihood that South Korea would revert back to its past reliance on martial law to suppress opposition.<sup>164</sup> This time however, the United States possessed the political leverage to prevent a military response to the protests.

On top of US pressure, the opposition movement had changed materially from the April Student Revolution of 1961 and the Seoul Spring of May 1980. Whereas those uprisings were dominated by students and intellectuals, the opposition now included all segments of the

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<sup>160</sup> Lee, 121.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Lee, 123; Kim, 480–81.

<sup>164</sup> Lee, 123.

population, including religious leaders and the previously apolitical middle class.<sup>165</sup> The combination was too much to ignore and Chun was forced to adopt a direct election presidential system and risk the defeat of his chosen successor. Roh was elected president in December 1987 after the opposition could not unify under either of its candidates, Kim Dae-jung or Kim Young-sam. Despite his connection to Chun, his election was the first truly democratic election in South Korea's history and set the stage for rapid liberalization and democratization over the next five years.<sup>166</sup>

### *Consolidation Phase*

Roh Tae-woo's election began a positive trend in South Korea's democratization that saw it peacefully transfer power for a second consecutive time in December 1992. The 1992 presidential election marked the first time in thirty years that Korea would have a civilian president and it was widely recognized by prominent democracy measures as the point when South Korea consolidated democracy.<sup>167</sup> Roh's five-year presidential term also coincided with the end of the Cold War and South Korea's ascendance as a major regional power following the success of the Seoul Olympics in 1988. Both factors significantly altered the US-South Korea relationship and increased South Korea's standing in the international arena, helping to maintain the momentum generated at the end of 1987.<sup>168</sup>

South Korea held elections for the recently empowered National Assembly in April 1988. The elections dramatically altered the balance of power in South Korean politics. Opposition parties won a majority in the legislative body for the first time, opening the door for executive branch oversight and the start of formal investigations into government corruption. The South Korean

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<sup>165</sup> Lee, 123.

<sup>166</sup> Kim, 483.

<sup>167</sup> Youngblood-Coleman, 12; "Polity IV Country Reports 2010: South Korea," 1; Kim, 519.

<sup>168</sup> Lee, 112–13; Kim, 485.

economy was also in the final stages of a positive turnaround following its brief decline during Chun's initial years. By 1988, South Korean exports exceeded \$60 billion annually and trade surpluses averaged \$7.7 billion in the three years leading up to Roh's election. With Asia's most powerful developing economy, South Korea began looking to expand its sphere of influence beyond the United States.<sup>169</sup>

The wave of democratic change in South Korea dampened anti-American feelings that grew as a result of the United States' public support for South Korean dictators.<sup>170</sup> Roh's support for democratic change meant the Bush administration had no reason to resort to Reagan's "quiet diplomacy." Instead, it could openly support democratic development and the South Korean government without contradiction. Bush also began adapting US policy to account for the effects of diminishing Cold War tensions and Roh's "northern diplomacy" toward traditional Cold War adversaries.<sup>171</sup>

In support of Roh's "northern diplomacy," the United States initiated bilateral talks with North Korea to encourage North Korea to integrate with the international community, refrain from further acts of terrorism, and work with the Soviet Union and China towards mutual recognition of the Korean governments.<sup>172</sup> The United States was careful to remind North Korea of its defense commitment to South Korea and the reciprocal nature of its diplomatic efforts. The United States needed to see progress on issues such as nuclear safeguards and the repatriation of missing US

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<sup>169</sup> Kim, 491.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 500.

<sup>171</sup> Lee, 112. President Roh's "northern diplomacy" was an effort to draw North Korea out of isolation by improving relations with traditionally socialist countries such as the Soviet Union and China. It was Roh's attempt to use an indirect approach to pressure North Korea to engage in six-party talks (U.S., China, Soviet Union, and Japan) to secure peace and stability in Korea.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 130.

soldiers or their remains, before comparable action was taken by the United States on North Korea's behalf.<sup>173</sup>

Initially, North Korea's refusal to agree to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards led to an impasse, but the passing of the Cold War and the success of South Korea's "northern diplomacy" placed North Korea under increasing pressure to acquiesce in other areas. By the late 1980s, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union had thawed to the point that both sides declared the Cold War over and anti-socialist revolutions in Europe were threatening to dissolve the Soviet Union entirely.<sup>174</sup> At the same time, President Roh's "northern diplomacy" succeeded in normalizing South Korean relations with the Soviet Union, culminating in the "Moscow Declaration" of December 1990.<sup>175</sup> The Soviet Union's departure from the Soviet-North Korea Treaty of Friendship left the North Koreans with only China as its exclusive partner, but by 1991, even China joined in pressuring North Korea to come to terms with the new political landscape. By 1992, South Korea maintained diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and China, and through its relationship with the United Nations, possessed international cooperation in its efforts to maintain peace and stability in Asia.

From 1988 to 1992, the national interests of the United States and South Korea converged to a degree that had not previously been possible. The passing of the Cold War and South Korea's democratic reforms in 1987 coincided to eliminate past obstacles to democratization. For the United States, communism was no longer a driving force in security decisions and South Korea's emergence as a regional power made it equally opposed to renewed hostilities in Korea. For South Korea, its economic and military strength enabled it to increase the scope of its diplomatic activities

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<sup>173</sup> Lee, 132.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>175</sup> Lee, 143; Kim, 502–3. The "Moscow Agreement" between South Korea and the Soviet Union declared mutual respect for sovereignty, ruled out armed conflict between the two countries, and agreed to peaceful settlement of regional conflict.

and improve its standing internationally. As a result, the threat posed by North Korea was significantly diminished, removing what had been an effective tool for justifying oppressive policies. Under these conditions, South Korea successfully transferred presidential power to Kim Young-sam during the free and fair elections of 1992, marking the first time since Syngman Rhee that a civilian was elected president.<sup>176</sup> South Korean democracy would continue to improve under Kim Young-sam, but Roh Tae-woo's willingness to accept democratic constitutional reform and commitment to protecting human rights and investigating corruption established the foundations for South Korea's democratic transition.

## Conclusion

South Korea's democratization process was defined by a pattern of rebellion, oppression, and regime consolidation that repeated itself for four decades until perfect conditions for democracy emerged to break the cycle. In many ways, South Korea's journey to democracy is a textbook example of "the twisting path to democracy" experienced by countries throughout history.<sup>177</sup> It is a path defined by struggle, conflict, and violence, and one where problems and failure are less obstacles to democracy than they are building blocks in the democratization process.<sup>178</sup> However, the South Korean people did not choose democracy in the same way that many of its third wave peers did. The United States forced democracy on South Korea, placing it on the twisted path that ultimately led to it becoming one of the strongest democracies in the world.<sup>179</sup> In this regard, the South Korea case is a compelling example of how forced democratization can achieve great success.

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<sup>176</sup> Savada and Shaw, 15.

<sup>177</sup> Sheri Berman and Thomas Carothers, "How Democracies Emerge," *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 1 (January 2007): 37.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>179</sup> Laza Kekic, "The Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy" The Economist Intelligence Unit Special Reports, 2007, accessed November 14, 2016, [http://www.economist.com/media/pdf/DEMOCRACY\\_INDEX\\_2007\\_v3.pdf](http://www.economist.com/media/pdf/DEMOCRACY_INDEX_2007_v3.pdf).

The fact that South Korea's transition is simultaneously an example of natural democratization and successful forced democratization, indicates that there is little difference between the two processes. This implies that genuine attempts to install lasting democracy require effort spanning several decades and resilience to setbacks. Although the United States did not deliberately employ this strategy in South Korea, its concerns about communism and North Korea had the combined effect of keeping it committed to South Korea long-term while also tempering its expectations for democratic development. As a result, the United States supported the development of democratic preconditions such as economic wealth and political diversity, while still allowing South Korea to democratize on its own terms.<sup>180</sup> When South Korea transitioned to democracy under Roh Tae-woo, it did so because internal and external conditions were ripe for democratic change. Internally, improving economic conditions enabled the democratic reform movement to garner support across all social groups and demand change. Externally, decreasing Cold War tensions enabled the United States to finally provide the requisite pressure on South Korean political elites to accede to popular demands for change.

## Lessons and Recommendations

The South Korea case indicates that the difference between forced democratization and natural democratization should be a matter of degree but not kind. When excessive external influence makes the two processes significantly different, forced democratization is unlikely to produce lasting democracy. Forced democratization succeeds when the intervening power starts a country on the path to democracy and uses its influence to support the development of favorable democratic conditions, while still allowing the target state to democratize naturally.<sup>181</sup> Democracy is more than elections and bureaucracy. It requires a society that trusts the democratic system to

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<sup>180</sup> Berman and Carothers, 37.

<sup>181</sup> Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 15.

achieve compromise and an acceptance that electoral competition is the only legitimate means to that end.<sup>182</sup> By this definition, the democratization process should look the same regardless of whether it began as a result of internal conditions or foreign intervention. What distinguishes forced democratization from natural democratization is the ability of an intervening power to influence both the development of favorable democratic conditions and pressure the ruling elites to accede to popular demands for democratic change.

The success of forced democratization in South Korea indicates that wielding that influence in the right way, at the right time, and to the appropriate degree, are the keys to establishing lasting democracy. The United States held little influence on human rights within South Korea, enabling oppressive conditions that ended up being crucial to the democratic movement's growth and maturity. On the other hand, the United States exercised a great deal of control on South Korean economics and security, helping to completely transform South Korea into a highly industrialized and modern state. Future efforts to impose democracy must recognize that possessing leverage is important to enabling influence but does not necessitate its use.

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<sup>182</sup> Bermeo, 163.

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